

Two families, Three Days --- An Ang wedding in Chudonggua, Southwest China

Quanmin Li

Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, The Australian National University

Introduction

The Ang¹ are an ethnic minority who live in China, in the province of Yunnan, and also in neighboring Burma. Chudonggua is an Ang community in a semi-mountainous area in southwest Yunnan. It has 160 households, with a total population of 780. This paper is a description, based on the author's fieldwork in Chudonggua at the beginning of 2005, of an Ang wedding there.

Two Families

Weddings are the most important events for the families in Chudonggua in January and February of every year. They usually last three days and involve of course many families besides the two being joined in wedlock. Each family is part of a patrilineal descent group. In February 2005, I participated in one wedding there. This took place between the Wang lineage and the Yang lineage. The bride was from the Wang lineage; the bridegroom was from the Yang. Through this three-day wedding ceremony, the bride was incorporated into the Yang lineage as a new member. After her death, her soul will be worshipped by her husband's descendants, provided she is not divorced. Even if she is divorced, she can always go back to her natal family, since important relations are maintained with the natal family after marriage. .

The two lineages had both undertaken extensive preparations before the three-day wedding ceremony began. These preparations included selecting the exact date of the wedding, inviting the guests, arranging wedding helpers and preparing all the food for the wedding. The parents of both the bride and the bridegroom usually ask two or three young male members of the same lineages to go in person to invite guests in the same village. To invite guests from another Ang village, they present two bamboo tubes containing respectively tea and salt to somebody who has a good relationship with them in that village, and ask that person's help in inviting the villagers they plan to invite. The process is different when Han or Dai guests are invited from their nearby villages; an invitation card is sent to them. Most of the guests represent the paternal and maternal relatives of the bride and groom, and these must attend. Some guests come from other affinally related lineages in the same or other villages.

Both families invite their own relatives and guests, and the parents of the bride and bridegroom personally invite a Grand Master of Ceremonies (*da jie*), and a Lesser Master of Ceremonies, to represent each family. In addition, the bridegroom's parents personally invite two matchmakers to act on their behalf. The

matchmakers are two middle-aged men, who should be good at word-play and be thoroughly familiar with the whole wedding process. One, at least, must be a member of the bridegroom's lineage. The Grand Master of Ceremonies is usually an old man who has a good reputation and knows the ceremonial process of the wedding well. He may be the member of any lineage. The Lesser Master of Ceremonies should be a middle-aged man who has a wealth of experience in organizing and arranging weddings. He too need not be a member of either the bride's or groom's lineage, but both specialists may be affinally related to the lineage which invites them.

Besides all these preparations, the two families need to be familiar with the whole procedure of the three-day wedding ceremony. This includes a formal proposal of marriage by the matchmakers, the bridegroom's party collecting the bride from her home, the bride subsequently revisiting her parents' house, and then returning back again to her new family. I participated in this three-day wedding ceremony as a member of the bridal side, the Wang family, and so was unable to see everything which happened in the Yang house.

Three Days - The First Day

The house of the Wang family was crowded with relatives and other guests. Guests from other villages went on arriving until it was time for lunch. Some of the old men, and all the old or



Inserting flowers in the banana-leaf cones

middle-aged women, wore traditional Ang clothes. Some of these women were helping to insert flowers into triangular cones made out of banana leaves in preparation for the rituals of the next day. At both lunch and dinner, everyone was served pork with cabbage. The most important event that day was when the matchmakers, representing the bridegroom's parents, presented the formal proposal of marriage to the bride's parents in the evening. There are two hearths in an Ang house, one in the main room which is reserved for men and honourable guests, the other in the



Matchmakers proposing marriage

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interior sleeping area, where the women congregate. Before the matchmakers arrived, the elder male relatives of the bride's lineage sat around the hearth in the main room, drinking tea and chewing tobacco. Elder female relatives sat around the inner hearth. When it came to 10 o'clock in the evening, the two matchmakers entered the room and sat down at two empty places around the main hearth. They used tea and tobacco which had been specially prepared by the bridegroom's family to initiate the formal marriage proposal. Ceremoniously they presented a banana-leaf parcel with wrapped-up tea and tobacco in it to the Grand Master of Ceremonies who represented the bride's family. The matchmakers then at length pleaded on behalf of the bridegroom's proposal, explaining all the reasons why the match would be a good one. They ritually departed from the Wang household and returned three times before finally the Grand Master agreed to accept the offering on behalf of the bride's family. This was only after lengthy discussions between the Grand Master and the other relatives of the bride who sat around the hearth about the merits of the marriage and the dowry to be paid. After that, the Grand Master and the bride's father opened the bamboo parcel, brewed tea and invited everyone to drink tea and chew tobacco, to show that the marriage had been accepted by the bride's parents.



The Gift-sending ceremony

The Second Day

The Wang family house was thronged with people for the whole of the second day. Before lunch, the bridegroom's helpers² sent 40 kilograms of rice, 100 kilograms of cabbage, 40 kilograms of pork, 300 Yuan, 2 kilograms of tea, and 2 kilograms of raw tobacco over to the Wang family. Once it had arrived, the place was even more crowded, and the Wang family's helpers began cooking meat, vegetable and rice in the open courtyard. In one corner of the courtyard were two middle-aged men sitting in front of a table. They were responsible for receiving and noting all the gifts and money given by the guests to the Wang family. The bride wore traditional Ang wedding clothes which had been made by her mother, and walked around the courtyard welcoming the guests. More than 80 guests arrived during lunchtime. Some of them sat at tables on each of which there were two bowls of pork and two bowls of fried cabbage and a basket of rice, and began eating their lunch.

The formal wedding banquet started at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, after people had had their lunch. There were 14 tables for 8 or more people each arranged in different places; eight tables in the courtyard, three tables in the passages in front of the main room, and three on the veranda of the house. The tables overflowed with food: on each table there were several dishes made with pork, duck, rice noodles, minced beef (bought from

the market), eggs, melon, cabbage, a large basket of rice and a bottle of rice wine and a bottle of orange juice. Because the guests far outnumbered the available seats, they had to take it in turns to eat. The wedding banquet went on until nearly 8 o'clock in the evening, at which time the bridegroom arrived to collect his bride.

At around 6 in the evening, some of the men and women sitting in the passage outside the main room began to sing traditional Ang songs in anticipation of the bridegroom's arrival. The bride, who had been weeping more and more since a group of young single males had begun to tease her at the banquet, seemed to cry more sadly than before while listening to these songs. A crowd of some ten young men clustered around her trying to comfort her.

At around 8 in the evening, the bridegroom with his company (one young unmarried man who was his good friend, two unmarried young women who were village friends, and two middle-aged married women who belonged to his lineage), arrived at the Wang house to take his bride to her new home. The bride, perhaps

exhausted by her crying, looked quite faint when she saw her bridegroom coming. After a short pause, the bride and the bridegroom entered the main room together. The bridegroom and the young bachelor in his company sat to the left of the door. The bride sat to the right of the door.

The bride paid respects to the assembled elders by clasping her hands together slightly

above her head, so did the bridegroom. Three married women who were affinal relatives of the bride sat beside her. A woman holding several small flags³ sat on her left. A woman holding the cones made of banana leaves with flowers sat on her right. A woman holding a larger cloth bag containing blankets, towels and hand-made bags sat next to the latter. After the elders, male and female, who were senior villagers and agnatic relatives on the bride's side, had sat down around the respective hearths, a gift-sending ceremony for the new couple began. A middle-aged man surnamed Yang, representing the bride's affinal relatives, played the major part in this ritual. First he placed a basket container in front of the bride. The women sitting beside the bride placed a pair of small flags, a couple of the banana cone's flowers, a few grains of rice, and a cloth in the container. Then the Yang intermediary handed it to the bridegroom. The bridegroom raised the container above his head in thanks, and then returned it to the man. Then the intermediary presented the container to the elders present, in order of seniority, each time repeating the actions described above. So that the oldest male relative of the bride present was the first to be offered the container. The elder first blessed the new couple verbally. Then he removed the contents of the container, accepting them as a gift, and in their place put several Yuan on the container before handing it back to the intermediary, who presented it to the bride. The bride received the money offered by the elder. Then the

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intermediary started a new round of gift-sending. This ceremony ended at about 10 pm.

After the gift-sending ceremony, it was time for the bridegroom to go back home with his bride. The bride cried sadly in the arms of her mother. After a while, the women who had accompanied the bridegroom to the Wang house symbolically pulled the bride out of the house. The bride went on apparently crying until she had left the gate of her parents' courtyard.

The Third Day

The Wang house was not as crowded as the day before. Most of the guests were agnatic and affinal relatives of the Wang lineage. They were waiting for the bride to return. Before lunch, the bride and her bridegroom returned with their procession. They brought with them some meat, salt, tea and tobacco for the bride's parents. The bride wore new wedding clothes made for her by her Yang mother-in-law. After the bride and the bridegroom entered the main room, the bride's parents presented a white shirt to the bridegroom. When all the agnatic and affinal relatives were seated around the main hearth, the gift-sending ceremony between the new couple and relatives began, and exactly the same ceremony of gift-giving which had taken place the previous day was repeated. The oldest male relative of the bride was again the first person to receive the offering. The same man who had acted as intermediary the evening before acted now. The gift-sending process was identical in every respect to what had occurred on previous evening, except that this time it only included the family and relatives of the bride, and no unrelated villagers were present. After this was finished, the whole Wang family gathered together to have a big family lunch with the bridegroom. After lunch, the bridegroom helped the family to clear up and clean the tables.



Wang family before the bride's final departure

At around 2 o'clock in the afternoon, it was time for the bridegroom to bring his bride, together with her dowry, back to his family. The dowry included a television, a tape-recorder, a wardrobe, a quilt, a cooking pot, seeds, and farming tools. It filled up two entire tractors. Then the bride tearfully bid her final farewell to her parents and left for the Yang family's home with her bridegroom, followed by a procession of attendants and the two tractors carrying her dowry. The Yang family had got a new bride!

Notes

¹The Ang are officially known as the De-ang in China.

²Helpers are generally young active married affinal relatives.

³These had been prepared by the Yang family.